

Health declaration, brownfield help needed

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following letter was sent to Marianne Horinko, assistant administrator for the EPA's office of Solid Waste and Emergency Response.

First, I must say that we were extremely honored by your presence. Thank you for coming to visit our town so that you could witness firsthand the ordeal we are facing. Thank you for the wisdom and compassion that went into the decision to remove the vermiculite insulation from the homes in our town.

And again, we thank all of our EPA for sending such first-rate people here to deal with this tragedy. I feel that if these good people are given the rein to do what is right for our town, and America, the needless death and suffering due to exposure to these toxic mineral fibers will cease.

If given the rein and the resources to do what is right — to use common sense, and continue to acknowledge and develop the science — those who truly want to protect and save American lives, will, I believe, immediately push for a revision of all regulatory codes. There will be codes developed that rid the ignorant notion that all mineral fibers should be viewed as equally deadly. Asbestos exposure will no longer be viewed as a long-term health risk, but rather an immediate health risk. When latency has expired, the risk is immediate.

There will be an immediate push for research funding aimed at taking the uncertainties from the science; aimed at therapies that might return to us, and other exposed Americans, years of life that have been so callously stolen from us. There would be an

immediate move to follow through with the recommendations that Assistant Surgeon General Dr. Hugh Sloan made to NIOSH through Director Linda Rosenstock, as well as a hazard alert to all of America, informing the people of the danger of exposure to the vermiculite insulation. Undoubtedly there are hundreds of thousands of Americans who are being exposed to this toxic mineral fiber from Libby, as this poison trickles into their living quarters, exposing them and their children needlessly. America needs to be informed in a non-minimizing way. Our homes are a part of our environment.

I recently had opportunity to attend a town meeting with Dr. Kenneth Olden, director of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences. This man expressed the philosophy that people at the local level need to be involved in the processes of overseeing their environment. My response to him was that with protective agencies such as Environmental Protection Agency and Department of Environmental Quality, people don't understand the need to be involved. We have the impression that our environment is being looked after by our government protective agencies. Governments that we trust blindly — we believe that our tax dollars are working for the good of common people.

I hope we made you and your staff feel welcome, and please try to understand the tone of those who spoke with passion in their voices. As bizarre as it seems, it is a common response for someone who had just lost a loved one to be angry at the person who died. We, of Libby, have

just awakened to a nightmare, which we thought could never have occurred in America — we endure the devastation and acknowledge that we Americans of Libby, Montana, have a rich history of being viewed as insignificant.

Over the past 2½ years, many in our community have developed an acknowledgment of the toxicity of these mineral fibers, and we respect this microscopic killer as informed people will. The philosophy of people being involved in the oversight of their environment seems futile if our voices fall on deaf ears. I say this with the acknowledgment that voices of people who care, people within the science community, are not even being heard.

Policy makers need to be informed, and need to listen to the science. There needs to be an acknowledgment that policy makers of many other countries, in an effort to protect their citizens, have banned asbestos. With what has happened to the people of Libby, the science should no longer be ignored. These policy makers need to have the science presented to them in terms that they understand — namely that breathing an aerosol that contains .05 fibers per cubic centimeter (.05 f/cc) of air, for example, equates to the inhalation of approximately 700 fibers per minute, 42,000 fibers per hour or over a million fibers inhaled in a twenty-four hour period. Actual fiber numbers make the disguise disappear. It is thought that roughly 10 percent of the fibers inhaled are retained in the lung, meaning that over 100,000 fibers are retained in a twenty-four hour period.

In regard to amphiboles such as we have in Libby, the

exposed person carries the fiber burden for life, as the fibers are bio-persistent. Exposures are accumulative, and we really don't know how little of this stuff it takes to produce disease. The cancer rates in this country are staggering. Exposure equates to being robbed of a normal aging process and we continue to unearth and distribute these deadly mineral fibers upon America. Human beings should not have to endure exposure to mineral fiber.

I would suggest an inadequacy in the formula of cost-benefit and risk. What isn't in the equation is the value of a human life, the value of a year of life. Is life more precious at birth or at sixty years old? It is said that we can't put a price on human life, but can we realistically determine how much death and disease is acceptable, using an incomplete formula?

In closing, it is understood why the Declaration of a Public Health Emergency was not used in addressing the attic insulation, but we do have a health and research emergency here in Libby. At our meeting, I said that we were counting on this declaration to open doors to address the long-term health care issues that we face. In addition, doors would have been opened for research funding — our hope lies in the research.

These issues we still face, and we request that the Declaration of a Public Health Emergency be pursued on our behalf, as well as the economic revitalization through the Brownfields Program that you spoke of. This community needs to be put back on its feet with humanitarian compensation, justice and commitment.

Clinton Maynard

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